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INSIGHT

Humanitarian and Refugee Crisis in Ukraine

Updated March 18, 2022

The humanitarian situation in Ukraine continues to deteriorate following Russia's invasion on February 24, 2022. Russia's war against Ukraine threatens to trigger a wider humanitarian crisis and has resulted in massive refugee flows to neighboring countries. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stated that the war could cause "Europe's largest refugee crisis this century." With strong bipartisan support for the humanitarian response, Congress has increased U.S. humanitarian funding for Ukraine (see P.L. 117-103) while considering related challenges such as humanitarian access and protection.

Conditions Inside Ukraine

As a result of Russia's invasion, worsening humanitarian conditions have affected millions of people inside Ukraine (which has a total population of about 44 million, including Crimea). As of March 16, 2022, an estimated 6.48 million people had become internally displaced persons (IDPs) since late February. (Previously, the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine since 2014 had resulted in an estimated 1.4 million IDPs, with roughly 3 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and protection.) In the current crisis, national and international humanitarian groups have limited or no access to areas under attack. Evacuations from cities under siege by Russian forces are also precarious, with widespread reports of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL). The needs of IDPs and the communities hosting them are changing with the situation on the ground and are likely to intensify, given the conduct of hostilities.

Refugee Flows to Europe

As of March 18, 2022, UNHCR reported that more than 3.2 million refugees—half of which were estimated to be children—had fled recent hostilities in Ukraine, with more than 50% arriving in Poland. Hungary, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, and other European countries are also receiving large numbers of refugees. Although many of the refugees have been welcomed in the short term, the willingness and capacity of neighboring and other countries to host Ukrainian refugees in the long term is not yet clear. Government authorities, humanitarian organizations, local communities, and volunteers providing refugee reception and assistance have reported various challenges, including congestion and delays at most crossing points, and difficulties for third-country nationals trying to flee Ukraine. The number of people who have moved onward from neighboring countries is not known. UNHCR does not count as refugees individuals from other countries leaving Ukraine to return home. In addition, up to 168,000 people

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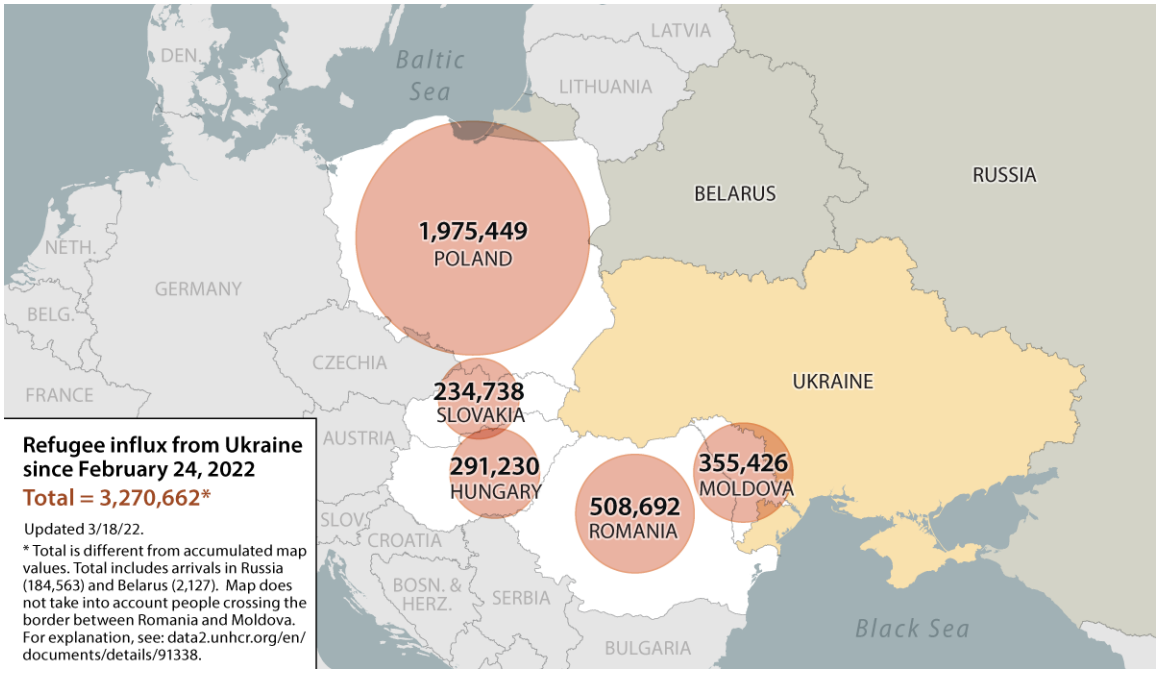
reportedly moved from Russian-occupied areas in Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions to the Russian Federation (and Belarus), but their status is unclear.

Figure 1. Ukraine Refugee Crisis



Sources: Created by CRS. Refugee data from UNHCR; boundaries from U.S. Department of State.

European Responses

On March 4, 2022, the European Union (EU) adopted a temporary protection mechanism for displaced persons fleeing Ukraine. The mechanism provides Ukrainian nationals and other legal residents of Ukraine who cannot safely return to their countries of origin with immediate rights of residency, medical assistance, and access to housing, education, and the labor market in EU countries. To take pressure off national systems for processing asylum claims, the mechanism applies collectively, waiving the need to examine individual applications. The decision initially applies for one year, with a provision that the EU may extend the mechanism to up to three years. The 27 EU member states unanimously approved the policy. Of the five frontline countries, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia are EU (and NATO) members, while Moldova is not. The EU also has directed approximately $550 million from its budget to provide humanitarian assistance in Ukraine and affected neighboring countries.

As of March 18, 2022, Poland had taken in more than 1.9 million refugees from Ukraine. Support for assisting Ukrainian refugees has been widespread across Polish society and political parties. The Polish government has set up a $1.8 billion emergency assistance fund to help assist refugees and provide access to health care and social services. Poland's capital city, Warsaw, has taken in more than 300,000 refugees, increasing its population by 15%; Warsaw's mayor has pleaded for additional assistance, stating that the city is "getting overwhelmed." The willingness of Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia to take in and support hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees contrasts with the anti-migration positions held by the three countries in recent years.

U.N. Humanitarian Appeal

On March 1, 2022, the United Nations launched a $1.7 billion humanitarian funding appeal to address the acute humanitarian needs of crisis-affected people within Ukraine and the region. The United Nations estimates that 12 million people inside Ukraine will need relief and protection, while more than 4 million Ukrainian refugees may need protection and assistance in neighboring countries. To cover an initial three months, the appeal seeks $1.1 billion to assist 6 million people inside Ukraine and $550.6 million to help support 2.4 million of the most vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers. In support of regional government efforts, the International Organization for Migration is assisting vulnerable third-country nationals.

U.S. Response and Issues for Congress

Between 2014 and 2021, the United States provided over $351 million in humanitarian assistance to help Ukrainians. As of March 18, 2022, the United States government had provided nearly $262.6 million in humanitarian assistance for Ukraine in FY2022. It is not yet clear how much of the U.S. contribution, if any, supports activities under the recent U.N. appeal. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022 (P.L. 117-103), includes $4 billion in additional funding for humanitarian assistance in Ukraine and the region through global humanitarian accounts in annual State Foreign Operations appropriations bills. The Biden Administration also announced it would apply Temporary Protected Status to Ukrainian citizens already in the United States.

While strong bipartisan congressional support exists for providing humanitarian assistance in response to the situation in Ukraine, Members of Congress may debate how such funds should be allocated and in what amounts. Members may also

- monitor the levels and types of humanitarian funding and emergency food assistance provided;
- conduct oversight of the delivery challenges encountered, including access and security conditions in Ukraine, which could significantly undermine the effectiveness of humanitarian operations;
- assess the situation and needs of neighboring countries hosting refugees fleeing Ukraine; and
- address other related challenges, such as those associated with civilian protection and violations of IHL.

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